

Cicero the consistent consul: saviour of the Republic

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The year 63 B.C. was one of the most turbulent in the dying days of the Roman Republic, at least in the eyes of our major source for the period, Cicero. For Cicero, this year was also the pinnacle of his political career, his year as consul. Here Eleanor Brooke argues that the two characterizations of this year may not be unconnected. Cicero needed to play up the dangers of various threats to Rome's security of which the Catilinarian 'conspiracy' was just one, in order to enhance his own status as 'saviour of the state' and ensure a lasting reputation for his consular achievements.

Catiline, enemy of the state?

If we are to believe Cicero, his consulship in 63 B.C. saw the worst crisis that Rome had ever faced; the Catilinarian conspiracy. Lucius Sergius Catilina – more popularly known as Catiline – was a member of one of Rome's leading aristocratic families, and until 66 B.C. had been advancing his career along familiar lines; praetor in 68, and governor in Africa thereafter. However, he was three times thwarted in his attempts to be elected consul; he was banned from standing in 65 due to charges of extortion against him, and was then beaten by other candidates in two successive years, in the elections for 63 and 62. This second defeat seems to have spurred him to seek power by other means, and throughout the last few months of Cicero's consulship, Catiline was gathering together like-minded individuals, with the aim of seizing control of Rome for themselves.

Cicero and Catiline had been sworn enemies ever since 64, when they seem to have fallen out over precisely the issue of whether they would run for the two consulships as allies or opponents. Cicero had since the beginning of 63 been warning his fellow senators of what was to come. They had remained unconvinced, however, and little decisive action had been taken.

Matters came to a head on 7th November. Two things had happened by this stage, although there was as yet no

evidence to connect them, and historians still disagree as to how far Catiline had masterminded them both. First, the centurion Manlius had amassed an army of disaffected individuals in North Italy, as a potential military threat to Rome; and second, Catiline had sent two assassins to murder Cicero in his bed. This was prevented by Cicero's guards; and once he had learned of the plot, Cicero seized his opportunity to denounce Catiline before the senate. He called a senatorial meeting in the Temple of Jupiter Stator, and delivered what was to be known afterwards as his *First Catilinarian* speech ('*Cat. 1*').

Cicero faced a difficult situation when getting up to deliver the *First Catilinarian*. He acknowledges some of the problems in the speech itself. The uprising he had been predicting for so long had finally occurred, but Cicero still had no hard evidence to connect this with Catiline. The ideal outcome of the speech was Catiline's departure from Rome, but as consul Cicero had no power to exile him directly.

Although the senate had equipped Cicero with its Ultimate Decree, which empowered the consuls to take any steps they thought necessary to preserve national security, he was being hampered in his efforts to tackle the conspiracy by those who thought him unnecessarily alarmist, or who still supported Catiline. His speech had to overcome all these difficulties – and, as it happened, it was largely successful in doing so: it precipitated

Catiline's departure, and so vindicated Cicero's version of events.

Cicero, guardian of Rome

But the speech itself was only one factor in determining how its audience responded. For the past ten months of his consulship, Cicero had been painstakingly creating a consular persona. By November 63, the date of *Cat. 1*, the sight of him standing up in the senate would have been familiar. As consul he would have spoken on a number of topics through the year, as well as introducing senatorial debates in alternate months. Unfortunately, only seven of his speeches from 63 survive largely intact. But a closer look at the earliest of these can show us the remarkable consistency with which he had presented himself to the public gaze, and the kind of consular impression he had tried to create from the outset. This is particularly relevant for considering *Cat. 1*, because so much of that speech focuses on events leading up to November. Cicero declares Catiline responsible for every threat to Rome in recent history, and makes this claim in the voice of Italy:

There has been no scandal through these past few years for which you have not been responsible, no disgrace in which you were not involved. (Cat. 1.18)

He casts Catiline as a worse revolutionary than those of Rome's past; by contrast, Cicero is the omniscient consul whose precautions have single-handedly kept the city safe. He describes himself as waging a war in secret, and identifies himself with the national interest:

Every time you attacked me, I defended myself entirely through my own resources – although I knew that my death would result in enormous damage to the state. (Cat. 1.12)

Cicero claims to have been the only person to take Catiline seriously as a

threat, and to have been working behind the scenes to safeguard himself and the state. References to earlier events create an overwhelming impression of consistency. This speech is shown to be the culmination of a continuous policy of action against Catiline – one in which Cicero stuck to his guns, followed his instincts, and emerged fully justified. The message is clear, to Catiline and to those who were sceptical: all is discovered, and steps must be taken.

Cicero on the alert: protecting Rome from Rullus

But this was not the first time Cicero had cast himself as single-handedly suppressing a plot against Rome. His inaugural speeches in January of 63 had dealt with a land law proposed by the popular tribune Rullus. Agrarian legislation was usually controversial, as it involved redistributing land from richer landowners to the urban poor. Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus had attempted such reforms in 133 and 123 B.C. respectively, and had been killed whilst trying to do so. In *Cat. 1*, Cicero compares their revolutionary actions to those of Catiline. Rullus' legislation was particularly contentious, as it entailed the establishment of a land commission with absolute power to confiscate and redistribute land at will. To tackle this, Cicero had to persuade the Roman people that such a measure was actually against their better interests. He did so by portraying the legislation as part of a sinister plot by Rullus and his supporters, to gain power for themselves. In his second agrarian speech, before the people, Cicero refers to secrecy and plots by night:

They never stopped meeting secretly among themselves, inviting certain private citizens, and they held these covert meetings under the cover of night and seclusion.
(*On the Agrarian Law 2.12*)

The uncovering of Catiline's hidden plots is a key feature of the *First Catilinarian*; suspicion of Catiline's intentions is heightened by Cicero's references to night and darkness. By contrast, Cicero there presents himself as fully aware of everything the conspirators intend; it is his omniscience which has brought these plots into the open. In just the same way, Cicero sets himself against Rullus; he as consul can see through these schemes, and is aware of the damage they will bring to Rome. What he foresees is remarkably similar to the precautions he has had to take against Catiline:

I urge you, citizens; consider how Rullus is planning to besiege and occupy the whole of Italy with his troops! (*On the Agrarian Law 2.75*)

As Cicero presents it, the outcome of Rullus' proposal will be military control over Italy, which would in turn threaten Rome. In *Cat. 1*, Cicero draws consistent attention to the garrisons he has had to mobilize against Catiline. To all intents and purposes, Rome is at war. In each speech, the rhetorical effect and intended outcome of such references are broadly similar. Cicero has to persuade each audience that not to follow his advice would be disastrous; he has to convince them of the seriousness of a threat which has not yet manifested itself fully. Such tactics were successful in both cases.

Writing oneself into the history books

Cicero's presentation of himself as consular figure was central to his speech against Rullus. In response to the dangers of the proposed legislation, Cicero offers himself as sole leader and protector:

I offer you this promise, citizens, in good faith; you have given the state into the care of a vigilant man, not a fearful one; to a diligent man, not an inactive one.
(*On the Agrarian Law 2.101*)

Such a portrait corresponds fully with that of the *First Catilinarian*. There too, Cicero devotes his entire life to the preservation of the state; the speech highlights his vigilance and diligence in following the conspirators' every move. He declares himself ready to take any step necessary for the protection of Rome, even at the risk of his own unpopularity. All that is needed is the unanimous support of all Romans.

For Cicero's modern readers, as well as by his own judgement, the Catilinarian conspiracy was the most significant event of his consulship. He compared it at the time, in his *Fourth Catilinarian*, to Scipio's defeat of Hannibal, and to Pompey's recent conquests in the East; he sought immortalization for it in talk and literature. 'I believe the safety of the city and the memory of my consulship will be associated with the same day for ever', he claimed. It also became a key reference point for him after 63; he accused the two greatest enemies of his later career, P. Clodius Pulcher in the 50s and Mark Antony in the 40s, of being newer versions of Catiline.

Cicero took great pains to ensure that this image of himself should be inscribed permanently into history, and attempted to persuade contemporary writers to publish accounts of his consulship. When this failed, he set about the task himself. The results were prolific: a prose version in Latin and Greek, his personal notebooks as consul, and a hexameter poem on the topic were all circulated in the years following.

Not enough survives of any of these accounts for us to speculate as to what

might have been included in them, or whether they were restricted to describing the conspiracy and its glorious outcome. But the way in which he published his consular speeches is significant. Three years after his consulship, Cicero chose twelve of his orations from 63 for publication as a collection. The four *Catilinarians* did appear; but also featured were eight others which did not address the conspiracy directly. These included the agrarian speeches. In publishing these speeches together, Cicero encouraged his contemporaries and later readers to consider his consulship as a whole, as no doubt his senatorial audience for *Cat. 1* would have done. These speeches are the closest thing we have to a consular autobiography.

Of course, their re-publication may have been influenced by later events. Disapproval of Cicero's actions was voiced even towards the end of his consulship; he was criticized for illegally executing Roman citizens without trial, and some considered him to have acted beyond consular or senatorial jurisdiction. Cicero's consulship continued to be hotly debated in subsequent years, and its outcome was even used by his enemies to engineer his exile four years later. We cannot know how much Cicero may have altered these speeches in view of this criticism, or edited them in 60 to cast him in the best possible light. What we can be sure of, though, is that he emerges as Rome's protector more than once; the speeches indicate a consistent consulship from start to finish.

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